

## Bartlett bill seeks police pursuit training facility

By John Pirro  
{ "by..." } STAFF WRITER

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Most police officers will go through their entire careers without once firing their weapon in the line of duty, but state law requires them to qualify with a firearm every year.

The same officers will get behind the wheel of a cruiser every day for 20 or 30 years and regularly respond to calls that require them to weave in and out of traffic, lights and sirens blasting, at speeds well above the posted legal limit.

Many will engage in at least one high-speed pursuit during their years in uniform.

But for the vast majority of police in Connecticut, hands-on driver training begins and ends with 40 hours of instruction at the academy at the beginning of their careers, with only four of those hours spent on emergency response and pursuit driving.

"The average officer doesn't get any driver training once they leave the academy," said Lt. John McAllister, a Ridgefield police officer for 23 years and a certified police driving instructor.

"This is a perishable skill," McAllister said. "If you don't train, you're going to lose it."

The main problem, police officials said, is that even though the statewide pursuit policy that became law in Connecticut a decade ago mandates police be trained in pursuit and safe driving tactics, there is still no facility where officers can practice those techniques.

State Rep. Jason Bartlett, D-Bethel, has been working with McAllister on the problem and has introduced a bill in the Legislature to construct a driver training facility.

"With the amount of settlements that are paid out and the tragedies that have occurred when there is an accident, this would go a long way toward alleviating the problem," Bartlett said.

The bill, which is scheduled for a hearing before the Public Safety Committee on Tuesday, would provide bonding money for the construction of a training facility, which could be used by police, state Homeland Security officials and the state military department.

No location has yet been identified, but the training center could become a regional one that could be used by out-of-state police departments and bring in revenue to offset some of the costs, Bartlett said.

As a result, most departments simply require that officers sit through classroom lectures on the pursuit law. Even the driving instructors at the police academy must rely on their own ingenuity and contacts to find a suitable location to train recruits, McAllister said.

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"As far as pursuit driving, we are at the mercy of our location," agreed Cromwell Police Chief Anthony Salvatore, chairman of the Police Officer Standards and Training Council, which oversees operation of the police academy in Meriden.

There is a "skid pan" at the academy, where new officers learn to control a sliding vehicle, and driving simulators at various locations around the state, Salvatore said, but those tools can only go so far in teaching officers what they need to know.

Police can occasionally use airport runways, parking lots and roads that are closed or under construction for high-speed driving maneuvers.

There is also a small, privately owned track in Newington that is used by the Department of Consumer Protection to test vehicles, but those facilities, especially the airports, must be reserved long in advance and are not always available.

"There is a need for such a facility," said West Hartford Police Chief James Strillaci, head of the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. "Most police departments don't have a place to train, and this is something that officers do relatively frequently, so there is a liability issue."

In the years between 1986 and 2007, there were 69 pursuit-related fatalities in Connecticut. During the same period, more than 7,400 people across the country died in accidents resulting from pursuits, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Bartlett's proposal faces an uncertain fate, especially in light of the current economic woes and the recent declarations by Gov. Jodi Rell that she would not approve bonding money on what she considered unnecessary projects.

Even if Bartlett's bill passed, the governor could refuse to release the money.

"I think this is a work in progress," Bartlett said. "I want to begin the conversation on the fact that we need this facility."

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If you go What: Public hearing on proposed bill concerning police officer training and the statewide pursuit policy Sponsor: Rep. Jason Bartlett, D-Bethel When: Tuesday, March 3 Where: Room 2-C, Legislative Office Building, Hartford Time: 11 a.m.

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